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Document Title: Putting the Moves on Your Readers: How to Construct a Seductive and Scintillating
Opening Paragraph
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Fall 2016 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

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Title of Writing Exercises: "Putting the Moves on" Your Readers: How to Construct a Seductive and Scintillating Opening Paragraph

Instructor's signature: Amelia Lee Hall

Date: 12/14/2016

Explanation of handout:

The opening paragraph of a literary analysis essay is a tricky genre to master, because it must grab a reader's attention, establish a viable topic, and articulate an arguable thesis, all within the span of a page or less. Unsure how to open an essay of this kind, first-year writing students often resort to plot-summary, which results in openings that are uninteresting and lead nowhere. To help counteract this student tendency, this handout demystifies the moves that a successful "opening paragraph" should make, and in particular suggests that students think of their opening paragraph as needing to have two good "one-liners"—the opening line, and the concluding thesis statement.

“Putting the Moves on” Your Readers: How to Construct a Seductive and Scintillating Opening Paragraph

Throughout “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” we see a love-sick man “putting the moves” on the object of his desire. And you, as a writer, are not unlike this young man—except in this case, the object of your desire is your reader, whom you wish to seduce into exploring your textual body further. Just as with any artful lover, this seduction begins with your opening line.

Your opening line:

While planning out how to grab her interest, Giovanni pays especial attention to his “opening line,” exclaiming: “Signora... there are pure and healthful flowers. Wear them for the sake of Giovanni Guasconti.” An intellectually stimulating, sexy sentence at the beginning of your essay (your literal and figurative “opening line”) is needed to stoke your readers’ desire to know more.

Stimulating ways to open:

- You can begin with a nod to something contemporary or some outside source, with which your reader will likely be familiar. However, to keep your thoughts creative rather than cliché, you should be sure that your example is highly relevant to the topic of your paper.

Example: “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; But the companion of fools shall smart for it.” King Solomon’s proverb appears reversed in King Lear, for is a wise Fool who accompanies and counsels a seemingly foolish king.” (Trimble 29).

- Re-describe a specific element of the story with vivid action verbs and surprising nouns

Example: “The occult element **leavens** Shakespeare’s works with a **pinch of the unknown** and an implication that it should remain so.” (Trimble 29)

- Use a series of short, punchy, phrases (or, alternatively, use a single short, punchy phrase)

Example: Prince Hall is **hard to crack** as a walnut. (Trimble 26)

Example: **He killed his brother. He married his brother’s wife. He stole his brother’s crown.** A cold-hearted murderer, he is described by his brother’s ghost as “that incestuous, adulterate beast.” The bare facts appear to stamp him as an utter moral outlaw.” (Trimble 28)

Example: In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the servant **is really** a lord, and the lord’s wife **is really** a page, and the schoolmaster **is really** a suitor, and the crazy suitor **is really** a wise old fox, and the perfect beauty **is really** a shrew, and the shrew **is really** a perfect wife, and **things are not as they seem.** (Trimble 28)

- Point out a difference between typical assumptions/expectations, and reality

Example: “To err” is typically not considered to be a good thing. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as meaning to “wander,” “stray,” or “miss a mark or proposed end,” the verb “err” is, in modern times, burdened by connotations of violation and transgression. Though *Jane Eyre’s* mid-

nineteenth-century England would have pronounced the verb as “ûr” rather than “Ër,” the act of erring nevertheless carried the same stigma in Charlotte Brontë’s Victorian society—...

Make a move to excite your readers

In the middle section of an opening paragraph, your aims are to *captivate* readers, and to *excite* them about your topic. You do so through making carefully planned rhetorical moves and gestures which provide concrete and specific details about your topic, and/or contextualize your argument within a larger critical conversation. Unless you have a compelling reason to do otherwise, aim to make this middle section full-bodied; that is, allow your essay the time and space to properly educate and entice a reader. That being said, remember that a good seducer won’t give everything at way all at once—you should leave some ideas to be developed in the body of your paper.

Moves you can make:

- You can provide some “juicy quotations” which ground your argument in the concrete details of the text.

Example: “Though *Jane Eyre*’s mid-nineteenth-century England would have pronounced the verb as “ûr” rather than “Ër,” the act of erring nevertheless carried the same stigma in Charlotte Brontë’s Victorian society—a society which, **as Jane’s aunt Mrs. Reed declares, “advocate[s] consistency in all things” (Bronte 29).**

- You can bring another thinker’s ideas into conversation with your own, and agree, disagree, or further complicate someone’s point. (For more examples, see thesis handout)

Example: Critic A and Critic B both agree that “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is about how nineteenth century women suffer at the hands of patriarchal paradigms. However, through examining the interrelated language of poison and atmosphere in the story, we can see that it is in fact an early eco-critical argument about the dangers unthoughtful humans can have upon their environment.

Conclude with a punchy one-liner that leaves you reader wanting more

Opening sections of papers typically conclude with the writer’s thesis statement. Think of this thesis statement as the “one-liner” that you will use to hook your readers (again). You should put as much obsessive care and planning into the structure and wording of your thesis statements, as you put into planning the structure of the paper as a whole.

In conclusion: An opening paragraph should be full of good one-liners

In order to be successful, an opening paragraph must “put the (rhetorical) moves on readers” that leave them excited and desiring to read more. You “put the moves on” readers through having:

1. A stimulating opening line
2. Middle gestures which concretize and creatively contextualize your points.
3. A punchy concluding one-liner (e.g., your thesis)

Work Cited:

Trimble, John R. *Writing With Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. 1975, Prentice-Hall, 2000.

Abstract

This handout demystifies the moves that a successful “opening paragraph” should make, and in particular suggests that students think of their opening paragraphs as needing to attract readers with two really good “one-liners”—the opening line, and the concluding thesis statement.

Tags:

Opening
Openers
Beginning
Opening line
Readers
start

Example of a Student Response:

Damn the Damsels!

She falls in love, she gets her heart broken, and then, she dies. It seems as though the short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” by Nathaniel Hawthorne is merely another tale of a damsel in distress, falling victim to the toils of young love and the ruthless destruction of the patriarchy. However, Beatrice defies this ever common storyline, forging her own path through a seemingly hopeless forest. Although literary critic Richard Brenzo argues that by forever infecting Beatrice’s body with poison, Dr. Rappaccini “has kept her ignorant, dependent on him, and therefore weak,” Beatrice manages to transform the hindrances of her poison into an opportunity to take control over her own life (Brenzo 150).